

The Chaco – Toward a long-term sustainability: conceptual contributions

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The Gran Chaco is a living organism. Inhabitants, nature, courses of water, climate, the sky. Let's imagine, it's like a person. It is an organism, which in the course of a few decades suffered considerable transformation. Changes, yet more incisive, threaten it actually, as a result of massive development projects and different initiatives that are in preparation. More than ever, we are confronted with the obligation of asking ourselves, „what do our human presence and activity mean for this immense organism, called the Chaco?“

To answer this question, this contribution proposes to discern where the Chaco is at. That is, a reading of what is happening by way of a careful observation. This observation will detect elements that contribute toward a diagnostic which is more complete, and to delineate some of the measures that should be taken into account.

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Usually the basis of such a diagnostic is formed by macroeconomic data, sociological- agronomic and lately also environmental data. The reading which is here proposed, takes a somewhat different approach. It would throw light on data that in some way are complementary to the data usually included in this type of analysis. We speak of the characteristics of the Chaco, it's way of being, processes - social and ecological processes - that are occurring, and which we have to take into account, when we decide what to do in the Chaco, for the Chaco, which projects, which measures to apply. Because - and here is the first observation - we know about the special characteristics of the Chaco, and we know that it is a delicate being. Not any new thing benefits it.

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A first type of observations deals with the characteristics at the core of the Chaco's way of being:

1. The persons that have come to the Chaco, perhaps felt and lived this too. Since the Chaco is plain, to be here, conveys a very particular impression. There's no horizon. Traveling, it seems as though one does not go anywhere. One feels a certain disconnection with the rest of the world. At times we have the impression of simply being, a kind of tranquillity, of serenity which in the context of our usual hyperactivism, we experience as being immobilized. There's nowhere to go. The farthest one can see, apart from the clouds, is

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some point in the vicinity. It's like falling back on oneself. Being centered upon oneself, is the prevailing feeling. The interior life, the local life; the details of life in the place where we find ourselves, become increasingly important. One is open to what happens here and now. And one is open to catch any opportunity that will arise out of the instant. It's not surprising then, that the Chaco ethnic groups, are gatherers. The characteristics of being in the Chaco, have left their marks on it's inhabitants. And we find these characteristics stamped on their way of being.

2. The second observation refers to something that persons who have not always lived in the Chaco, perceive as a basic condition of scarcity. There's little water, and it's not found everywhere. The vegetation is not exuberant, compared with other regions. The resources of nature seem to be very scarce, and even the persons. This observation becomes more acute, when compared with a way of life that is filled with the elements of our own modern life culture. The traditional Chaco inhabitant lives his life with resources much more precarious, much less abundant. It's a way of life closer to the absolute minimum requirements and to pure survival.

The fact that there are fewer things, creates the impression that there is more room, more space, more silence, but also greater disposition. Where there's not much, our senses need to become sharpened, in order to capture what *is* there. And he who sharpens his senses in the Chaco, starts to perceive a variety and richness of natural elements which is very particular.

3. The following characteristic which will be observed, seems to play in with the others mentioned. With the emphasis on the local, on the disposition, on the minimum of resources. The social relations are very essential in the Chaco. And not only the social relations between it's inhabitants, the people, but also the relations (which might also be called „social“), between the persons and their environment. To be able to survive in the conditions of the Chaco, one has to know how to be one's proper agent. But one also has to know where to go, where to search for help, when necessity demands. And there's a moral obligation to provide help. The Chaqueños are very interrelated in a vital informal network of mutual help. One has to know also, where to go, to find the resources that at times are failing in one place. In isolated form, anonymously, one cannot live or survive in the Chaco, and one needs to maintain an intimate relation, a respectful relation with nature.

4. The fourth observation, the last of this type, refers to a key element in the Chaco, - the water. The courses of water and the rivers. There are underground rivers, like the Timane or the Parapiti in the northern part. There is a watershed toward the north, the Amazon basin, and there are two toward the south, that both gather in the Rio de la Plata. In the Chaco, the waters separate. The waters do not go into the Chaco, they come out of it. When an expert in Geology and Hydrology was consulted by this author, a person well versed in the character of Chaco inhabitants also, he said that the behavior of the rivers is diverging. They are not constant. The riverbeds vary in natural manner, even without human intervention in modern times. He said, „Chaco rivers are like the Chaco people. - They do what they want“. And he said, “things happen which modify them, but on the long run they remain the same”.

Expect...one needs to add, when the modifications are very strong, very incisive, like deforestation or the modification of the water beds or the climate, caused by modern humanity.

This fourth observation places an additional emphasis on the image which proceeds from the Chaco. We see it's savage nature which escapes our control, telling us that it does what it wants. But on the other hand it tells us that "nothing happens", that everything remains immobile, as mentioned already. And if anything happens, everything falls just the same back on its original state of being. But here we have to introduce a differentiation. There are modifications that the Chaco can digest without changing its nature, but there are others which change it profoundly. There are modifications and modifications.

To resume the four observations, the Chaco conveys the image of an organism centered upon itself. The local processes, acquire a great importance, and it is important to be open and able to grasp any opportunity: its resources are accessible, but only with a certain sensitivity and available in very limited quantity. The mutual interrelationship in a vital network is a basic condition for life in the Chaco. And what results from the fourth image, the rivers, the Chaco has its own life, which we don't always understand, which at times resists change, but at the same time is very vulnerable to massive interventions.

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A second group of observations refers to the fact that different people perceive the Chaco in a very different manner. Two or more realities exist, and superpose themselves one on top of the other.

5. The first example of this we have when we think of the group of indigenous people, the Ayoreo- Totobiegosode, which still live in the forests without direct contact with surrounding society and civilization. They move in what is a part of their traditional territory. They live more or less their traditional life as hunters and gatherers. We know that at times they observe, well hidden in the height of some tree, the travelers, white families that pass through their territory or who live in the midst of it. They gather elements left behind by white people, like plastic or aluminum.... And here it is fascinating to propose a question: What is their perception of reality? When we try to put ourselves in their place and to imagine that we form part of this indigenous people in the forests, we then live in the republic of Paraguay, with its limits, with a political internal division, with roads, towns, with a government, but...we don't know all this. We simply live in our territory and our world, where we have always lived, with its limits, places of reference, its trails. We sense it as becoming a little narrow, certainly, we feel that there is incursion by other people. But we know next to nothing about Paraguay, nor about the rest of the world. Just barely we see the airplanes that cross the sky toward Bolivia on Tuesdays and Fridays, but we don't even know that it's Tuesdays and Fridays. - Two perceptions of the same reality. The Totobiegosode live on our map, without knowing it. They live in our time, without knowing it. Or we live in their reality, without realizing it. On their territory, without knowing it, in their world and in their time, without

realizing it....All the while we assume quite naturally that our perception of reality, based on our universal conceptualization of reality in the western world, is the correct one. What can we do with this superposition?

From this paradox there are two visions of the future and about reality, possible: ours - that of the majority - and theirs, those that were always here.

There are also two superposed maps, or mapping systems. While ours separates Paraguayans from Bolivians or Argentineans, distinguishes between Indigenous and the Criollos and the Mennonites now living in the Chaco, the Ayoreo social map consists, over and above that, of an invisible network which extends over the whole Chaco to the borders of what was and is the traditional habitat of the different Ayoreo local groups, extending from the West to the Paraguay river and from the northern Bolivian Chaco to the central Paraguayan Chaco. It is a network of clanic relationships, which permitted every Ayoreo, be he where he may, to find help and support from those who belong to the same clanic and mythological family, which also extends to and includes certain elements in nature.

Two concepts of land and territory, are equally superposed. The white man perceives land as something which one can possess. Private property or associate property, exclusive, with all the rights, even the right to destroy it. The other conception is the indigenous one, not only the Ayoreo in this case, which implies that there can be no property, but only use, access to make use of the territory, if we try to express it in white legal terms. But the indigenous conception implies the existence of harmony with nature. To destroy nature, would be to destroy oneself. At this point we discover that in the other reality, "their" reality, there exist concepts and the awareness of a relationship with nature, that we do not share in our reality which is the consensus reality of the majority nowadays. To promote this awareness on a broader level, seems vital for the survival of the organism Chaco and our survival in general.

Finally, two legal systems with different conceptions find themselves superposed, which define in sometimes even contradictory manner, what is licit and what is not. Usually we conceive this other legal reality not according to its own terms, but according to our terms. We speak of an indigenous right upon their land, but we define it with images and concepts of our legal system. The question pops up, if a group of indigenous people can live on the long term, on land which is conceived according to our own legal concepts.

Resuming these data once more, we realize with perplexity that there exist two concurrent realities, two worlds, two or more systems of belief, a fact we cannot ignore. Especially since one of these realities seems to contain elements which may be vital for the system Chaco in its totality. These elements need to be protected and preserved in the interest of the whole. On the other hand this reality which seems vital, is today in a minority position, it is not well known. In fact we discover that the Chaco has an internal delicate life of its own, fascinating, and actually conflicting. There is a struggle between systems of belief and ways of life, which is being carried out with much power, violence and with very unequal arms indeed.

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A third group of observations will focus on a few aspects of the social processes which unfold in the Chaco.

6. The first of these call our attention to the Mennonites of the Central Paraguayan Chaco. They arrived in very hard and precarious conditions in the late 1920ties, to occupy the land which today represents a center of political and economic power that nobody can ignore. The land which they bought from an argentine company, was indigenous land. The Mennonites themselves brought with them the bitter experience of a people who lost their land and were thrown out of their homes more than once because of religious beliefs. They also brought with them the will to defend the vital space now found in the Chaco, the only place left to them, where they could maintain their system of religious beliefs and a way of life concordant with this system. These interests opposed and today oppose in a sharply increasing way, the indigenous interests. Affected by the consequences of a religious conflict of Europe in the 18th century, the indigenous population of the Central Chaco today live within the mennonite colonies in a system somewhat like apartheid, which means that they are not in fact integrated. They have to compete with the growing expansive interests of Mennonites involving land claims, and they probably will represent the most problem afflicted stratum of society in the future, within the Mennonite colonies. At the moment the Mennonites still manage to keep land-less indigenous groups at a certain distance.

There's a certain parallelism between the two, that draws my attention. Both groups of people, the Mennonites and the various groups of indigenous people, need vital space to maintain their collective identity, their beliefs, their way of life. At the moment the Mennonites can impose themselves because of their power, but with time this situation could erode. It could be that the indigenous will become dominant because of their sheer numbers or because of the existential pressure of intolerable conditions of life. Even though positive images are being projected, we have here a situation of conflict with an explosive potential. The question is whether there are alternatives to an escalation of this conflict.

The case of the Mennonites is not the only potential of conflict that was exported to the Chaco. For quite a while already the unjust distribution of lands in the eastern part of Paraguay has been causing the migration of thousands of Campesino families to the Chaco, where they tried to find a place of life as precarious squatters. The same thing occurs also in the Bolivian and Argentine Chaco where the Criollos – being victims of the dominant political an social system - come to confront and to compete with other victims of the same system, for the delicate and vital opportunities of survival.

In many cases the different parties that confront themselves, do not really look at each other. They are blind for the necessities of the other. Their own pain, their own needs and their own fears do not permit them to see the others. All of them have been victims and now defend, with mistrust, their perhaps last possibility of survival. Other than not looking at each other, they ignore, they

do not understand the forces and the processes which envelope them and which are their enemies, and which make them enemies.

Yet other influencing forces which claim the Chaco, must be mentioned. The governments of the Chaco nations and other, more distant governments; big farm owners, cattle ranchers, land speculators, unknown people from outside the Chaco and from abroad which bought up huge extensions of territory, colonies of new immigrants, corporate national and foreign interests in the Chaco, searching to get hold of its natural resources, to put up bases of productivity, or simply bases to invert money. If we imagine our continent being a tree loaded with fruits, then the Chaco is one of the last fruits on this tree which can still be plucked. Until recently there were other more attractive fruits, closer to the outreach of the centers of power.

There are parties which need the Chaco to make a living, and others which do not need it, but use it for expansive purposes, in order to gain power and material wealth. That is another differentiation which we should take into account.

At the beginning we spoke of an internally conflicting situation; with the analysis of a few aspects of the social processes which actually unfold, we now see the Chaco also as being engaged in external conflicts. We can see this living organism which we have analyzed, as a gigantic scenario of conflicting interests of human groups, some of which are undoubtedly legitimate, whereas others are questionable.

The future of the Chaco is unthinkable without a solution which would permit the living together, the symbiosis of these groups, that is those groups which really need it to survive.

But it also becomes visible that the survival of the Chaco depends on its position in a wider context, as a social being, as a member of the worldwide Society of regions and territories which up to now were left in peace because they seemed far away and because they seemed poor and unproductive. Now that has changed. Now the last places of the earth are needed for the future of modern humanity. And this organism is in danger of being assaulted by the blind and uncoordinated necessities of this humanity. In a few cases a vital necessity, in others an artificial, and disproportionate, inflated necessity. The unity of the Chaco which for thousands of years enjoyed a stable condition of health, will not resist just any impacts of the present.

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To finalize this brief analysis of the actual situation of the Chaco, we could deduce a few conclusions, formulate a few criteria, which will have to be taken into account when government and international organizations of cooperation or private groups of interest project new initiatives and projects of development.

1. It is important to consider the Chaco, as did the present contribution, not by parts, nor by sectors or interest groups nor professional perspectives, but as an integral living organism, whose life and survival, according to its own terms, has to be in the interest of all.

That would mean that for any future projections a holistic and multi-disciplinary approach, recognition of the global processes and the interrelationship of parts, groups and sectors, disciplines and interests will have to be applied. It would mean the need to contribute toward a favorable management of the present conflicts, human conflicts as well as the conflicts with the environment. It finally means to recognize who we are, where our legitimate interests as a global society or as the social sector with which we identify ourselves are located, and where the interests of the Chaco itself in its integrity are located. These interests may be in conflict.

2. Let us discover how the Chaco really is, before deciding which measures to apply. Let's place ourselves as listeners. When we perceive its way of being, we have better possibilities to appreciate and to decide what measures the Chaco needs, which may not be exactly the ones we like.

This means to decipher the messages and to interpret the vital signals of the Chaco. It means trying to understand its images that we gather on the field of interdisciplinary research and the channels of our perception, augmenting the criteria usually employed, and complementing them with others as far as possible. It may mean that we temporarily need to suspend our own concepts, our categories of perception and images with the goal of better capturing the strange and the yet unknown.

3. Let us respect the Chaco. This proposal may seem somewhat childish - like saying „let's be good!”

But concretely it means to differentiate between our necessities and those of the Chaco, - to subordinate our necessities to those of the Chaco. It means to give force to our interests and necessities where they coincide with the interests and the necessities of the Chaco in its integrity, of all its people and all of nature.

4. Let's take the Chaco as our master. He teaches not only what to do with him, but will give us opportunities to learn, which may serve us well in other similar situations. The nightmare which the Chaco today lives, in part represents the same phenomenon that occurs in other parts of the world. If we attain life for the Chaco, then we will have learned to give and to promote life for other similar organisms and ecosystems, and, last but not least, for ourselves.

Among the lessons that the Chaco can teach us, there is the importance of attention to what happens locally. The necessity to measure and to use with care, with delicacy, its elements necessary for survival. The vital importance of the social relationships and conscience and awareness that we can survive only on the condition that there will be mutual respect among people, and respect for nature. The necessity of a favorable management of the conflicts occasioned by opposing systems of belief and life. And finally, the re-dimensioning of our pretensions and the search for a more favorable equilibrium between our own will and intentions, and the global processes.